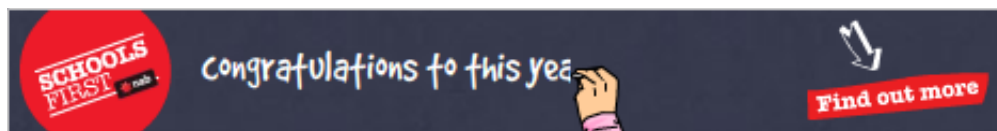




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Cosi

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In Louis Nowra's *Cosi* there is the world beyond the stage, and the world that materialises upon it. The main character, Lewis, faces background issues to do with the Vietnam War, and his relationships with his housemates. Similarly, for the asylum inmates there is the dangerous reality of the institution and the aspects of their various illnesses. These concerns of the outside world become entwined with the narrative of Mozart's *Cosi Fan Tutte* on stage. Reality and fiction meld. A gentler, more comical representation of their lives is formed and then performed.

Cosi is set in 1971 in Melbourne. Thus it involves the historical context of the anti-Vietnam War protests and the feminist movement for women's equal rights. Lewis, his girlfriend, Lucy, and housemate, Nick, are all opposed to the war. Nick and Lucy are absorbed in organising a moratorium, or protest march, against the war.

For them, this takes precedence over their university studies or acting pursuits. They therefore become annoyed with Lewis, who seems more interested in his production of *Cosi Fan Tutte* with the asylum inmates. As Lucy says: "How to stop the war in Vietnam is important ... Love is an emotional indulgence for the privileged few." She refers to the theme of infidelity, which is central to the opera. Lucy and Nick's shared passion against the war, along with Lewis' increasing dissociation from them, drives them to become lovers. For Lewis, the infidelity in the opera plays out with cold irony in his personal life as Lucy betrays him.

While Mozart's opera is a comic take on what he sees as the fickle nature of women, *Cosi* represents multiple views on love. In keeping with feminist discussions about the stereotypes of women, Nowra's characters voice differing opinions on women's roles in society and in relationships. Lewis sums up the traditional view of women as put forward in Mozart's opera: "Woman's constancy is like the Arabian Phoenix. Everyone swears it exists, but no one has seen it." Various characters challenge this view, such as Julie, when she points out that "women are flesh and blood too". Rather than arguing for women being "constant", Julie argues that they are just like men with their own desires and needs. So, while Lucy's liaison with Nick can be seen as confirming Mozart's rather misogynist view of women, from a modern standpoint it merely confirms that all people are at the sway of their desires. Indeed, Nowra comically underscores this when he has the blackout end and the lights come up on Julie and Lewis kissing. Both Lucy and Lewis have been not entirely faithful to the other. Men are just as "inconstant".

But these two socio-historic themes are merely a backdrop to the centre-stage action of the group's "mad" performance. Like Lewis, the audience forgets the outside world and is drawn into his struggle to create a piece of art in spite of his actors' obsessions and quirks. Though the final performance is imperfect and comical, the accomplishment of putting on a performance is success in itself.

At first Lewis fights against the idiosyncrasies of the actors before him. He initially opposes Roy's dream. He ignores Ruth's obsessive needs. He is unable to reach Henry in his mute paralysis. But he gradually relents and finds a compromising way that allows them to speak and move as actors. Ironically, it is Nick who gives Ruth a number of steps to take, showing Lewis what "direction" means. Lewis gathers confidence and begins to take charge. Roy's dream, unimaginably ambitious, becomes doable.

The performance becomes a colourful hybrid piece that includes aspects of Mozart, but more importantly reflects the character of the group itself. For instance, it includes some of Zac's rather out-of-place accordion music. The testing of Ferrando and Guglielmo becomes an electro-shock session that brings the harsh world of the asylum into the production. Lewis and the audience learn more about the background of each character. Henry speaks of his wife who cheated on him, and of his soldier father. To placate him, Lewis turns Ferrando and Guglielmo from Albanian into Australian soldiers.

Roy's narrative of his fabulous thespian parents is founded on illusion, for he is an orphan. Lewis does not mock Roy for this, but allows him to live his dream. When Roy suffers stage fright, it is Lewis who reminds him "to aim for the stars". Rather than destroy the made-up narratives of their lives, Lewis helps the group to construct a healthier illusion within the world of theatre.

It is here among this world of fantasy, illusion and madness that a different type of love becomes apparent. This is love for other people despite their flaws. It is about different people working together to achieve something that is beautiful in itself.

Lewis, who initially believes that "love is not so important nowadays", gradually changes his mind to note that "without love the world wouldn't mean much". He is no longer directing "for the money", but for the love of it. In directing the performance he has been able to connect with people and to make a small difference in their lives. This is Roy's "music of the spheres": the beautiful, illusory world of art that nonetheless holds up a mirror of reality to ourselves.

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Text

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Further reading/viewing

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